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SUBJECT: DART UPDATE ON MARSH ARAB SETTLEMENTS

Summary

1. DART members from Kuwait City made several visits to Marsh Arab settlements in Maysan governorate between 4 and 9 June, including Al Amarah, the governorate's capital, and Al Khaila, a non-Marsh Arab community east of the Maimona "River of Honor". DART members were sometimes accompanied by representatives of the World Food Program (WFP) and by the Ministry of Trade (MOT) Ration Registration Center staff. The visits provided DART and WFP with a better understanding of the reasons why some Marsh Arab communities are under-registered in Iraq's Public Distribution System (PDS). They also provided an opportunity to begin a targeted on-the-spot registration process in these communities. Discussions with Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab leaders also substantiated information about livelihood patterns of populations in the marsh region before and after the draining of the marshes under the former regime.

2. DART meetings were held with the U.N. Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq (UNOHC) regarding its upcoming inter-agency Marsh Arab assessment and with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and its implementing partner, Ockenden International, about its current efforts to register Marsh Arabs as internally displaced persons (IDPs). The meetings increased DART and WFP concerns that approaching Marsh Arab vulnerability from an IDP rather than community perspective at this time may: 1) delay the implementation of relatively simple, quick impact community-based interventions which could address urgent needs of both Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab communities; 2) risk deepening rifts between Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab communities, and may strain already tenuous relations between various Marsh Arab tribes; and 3) result in an unjustified ethnic-based prioritization of needs. End Summary.

DART Visit to Al Adl AND Al Khair

3. On 4 June, DART visited Marsh Arab settlements in an area southwest of Al Amarah, between Al Adl and Al Khair. The settlements flank a dike running along the west bank of what is referred to as Saddam's "River of Honor," facing plains to the west that were previously their marsh homeland. Residents reported that their villages were not affected by any significant military activity during the recent conflict. Most of the government infrastructure visited, a primary and secondary school, a clinic, and a pumping station, however, were thoroughly looted. The clinic, located in a new building in Al Khair that was built within the past 18 months to serve 16 Marsh Arab villages in the area, had expensive medical equipment reportedly removed by the government in anticipation of a Coalition forces occupation. The schools and the pumping station were reportedly stripped and damaged by local residents.

4. The priority needs identified by interviewees were potable water, electricity (available for approximately one hour per day), and adequate health care. There is a functioning clinic in Al Adl that is reported to be facing a serious lack of drugs, particularly for the treatment of diarrhea and leishmoniasis. Other common diseases reported were malaria, Malta fever, urinary tract infections, and acute respiratory infections. DART will pursue the drug supply issue with the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the U.N. World Health Organization, and Medecins Sans Frontieres in Al Basrah.

Quick Impact Projects

15. DART identified three possible rehabilitation projects in Al Khair: the clinic (see paras 3 and 4), a looted elementary school (serving 100 students from the neighboring villages), and a pumping station for safe drinking water (in good condition but stripped of four critical motors for intake and output pumps). Despite reports that the tribes in this area are under the authority of an influential Sheik in Al Amarah, the lack of any kind of political or social cohesion among them became apparent during the discussions, and can easily pose serious challenges to the security and sustainability of "quick impact" interventions. As one of the tribal leaders described it when asked about the looted elementary school, "the desks are in the village houses. That village [tribe] does not see the school as their problem."

Registration in the Public Distribution System (PDS)

16. In the areas visited by DART, tribal leaders reported that they had previously been asked by "a man and a woman" to make a list of families who were not registered in the Public Distribution System (PDS) food ration program. They prepared the list, and gave it to "the man". They did not know who the man was or where he took the list. According to the leaders, there were about 150 families on the list (approximately 5 percent of the total number of families), but the leaders were not sure that all unregistered families had identified themselves. Family size was estimated at between seven and eleven people, but has been reported to be as high as 17 people per family. Leaders reported that the most common reason for families not being registered was the desertion of a family member from the army, or failure of an eligible member to register for mandatory military service. (Note: By WFP's assessment, the number of unregistered families may vary from between five to thirty percent of the total number of families. End Note.)

17. DART assumed that the "man and woman" who had made the request were staff from Ockenden International, a British non-governmental organization (NGO) and an implementing partner of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that is registering Marsh Arabs under its mandate for the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs). While this turned out not to be the case, DART verified that Ockenden was in fact registering Marsh Arabs for IOM by recording a family's lack of a PDS ration card as a need for food assistance. In theory, IOM would then request rations from WFP under the rubric of vulnerable group feeding.

Vulnerable Versus IDP Status

18. In Al Basrah, DART discussed with WFP and the U.N. Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq (UNOHCI) its concerns regarding the approach being taken by IOM, that is, viewing the needs of Marsh Arabs as an IDP problem. UNOHCI informed DART that it was under significant pressure to be able to provide information about the Marsh Arabs as a vulnerable group, and that it will also have to demonstrate its ability to coordinate a rapid U.N. response to urgent needs affecting Marsh Arab communities. When the creation of a special task force and interagency assessment for Marsh Arabs was proposed to the U.N. community in Al Basrah, however, a majority of the U.N. agencies objected. They insisted that focusing humanitarian assistance on one particular vulnerable group was not appropriate in the current environment of widespread instability and vulnerability in Iraq. A compromise was reached with the creation of a UNOHCI-led "Vulnerable Group Task Force". The Task Force is initiating its activities during the week of June 16 with the inter-agency assessment of Marsh Arabs. DART encouraged UNOHCI to take advantage of IOM's DART-funded "Iraq Transition Initiative" (ITI), through which several projects benefiting Marsh Arab communities are already being considered.

19. In discussions with WFP, DART stressed that in terms of non-registration in the PDS, approaching Marsh Arab communities from an IDP perspective risked delaying their receipt of food assistance and did nothing for them in the long-term. Most of the families in these Marsh Arab communities have been residents for between six and ten years and a majority are registered with the PDS. Non-registration in the PDS has little to do with having been displaced from the marshes, and much more to do with their political opposition to the former regime. WFP agreed that a more direct approach to integrating these families into the PDS was required, and DART and WFP agreed to return to Al Amarah on 8 June to address this issue with Ockenden, the Ministry of Trade (MOT) director, and the Ration

Registration Center (RRC) manager. (Comment: With WFP's assistance, a decentralized approach to PDS registration has already been adopted in Al Basrah and An Nasiriyah, both governorates having significant Marsh Arab populations. In Al Basrah, the MOT has publicized registration dates and locations using radio and local information networks. Representatives from the governorate's RRC have been traveling to designated registration focal points. Families are being registered by hand and issued provisional ration cards. A family's enrollment will become permanent when all the necessary documentation is submitted and the registration confirmed by the Central MOT in Baghdad. End Comment.)

DART AND WFP Travel to Al Amarah

¶10. On 8 June, DART and WFP staff traveled to Al Amarah. At the City Council's offices, the group held discussions with the head of the Al Amarah City Council, who is an influential figure in both the governorate's Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab communities. The meeting had a very disagreeable start, with the Sheik expressing his disappointment with the Coalition forces in general, and his dismay over the number of "foreigners" who had come to the governorate "with their paper and pencils" to assess needs, but whose visits had yielded no tangible assistance. He indicated that the Council had considered denying "foreigners" any more access to the governorate because of the people's disillusionment with both Coalition forces and the international humanitarian community. WFP's Area Coordinator (an Egyptian) then reminded the Sheik that they were both Arabs, there was work to do, and that perhaps politics could be discussed over tea later. The tension lifted, and the rest of the discussion went favorably.

¶11. DART discussed what it had seen in the Marsh Arab communities on 4 June, describing the looting that had crippled schools, clinics, and pumping stations, and requested City Council leader's view as to the value of rehabilitating this infrastructure at this time of uncertain security. The City Council leader described how in Al Amarah, after an initial outburst of destructive protest against the regime, local leaders had been able to mobilize the people to secure the town and prepare for the arrival of Coalition forces as an already liberated city. He indicated that any resources brought to Maysan communities now would be well protected, despite the almost total absence of Coalition forces.

¶12. WFP presented the idea of an immediate PDS registration campaign, primarily targeted toward the governorate's Marsh Arab communities. The City Council leader supported the idea, but expressed concern that many of the families in these communities had avoided all contact with the former regime, and that many of them did not have the official documentation required by Baghdad for registration. WFP reiterated that the registration is to be conducted by the Al Amarah MOT office, and that families will be registered at the governorate level until such time as an acceptable and accessible system of identity documentation was established/re-established for those lacking official birth, citizenship, and marriage documentation. The City Council leader offered his assistance in encouraging non-registered families to come forward. The discussion ended on friendly terms, with WFP and DART being invited back "if desired." DART members stated that the next time they visited pencils and paper would be left in the vehicles.

MOT/Al Amarah and Ration Registration Center

¶13. DART and WFP proceeded to the MOT/Maysan governorate central warehouse and administrative offices. After visiting the warehouse stores, where several food agents from Al Amarah city were in the process of collecting their commodities, the group was received by the MOT RRC manager. The ensuing discussion focused on reports of under-registration in Marsh Arab communities, and DART's conversations with tribal leaders during its visit to the Adl-Al Khair corridor on 4 June. The RRC manager produced a list of 162 heads of households, the same list discussed by tribal leaders during DART's 4 June visit. He also indicated that the number of unregistered individuals in the Marsh Arab communities was very small, because registration campaigns were carried out annually. He also expressed concern about registration procedures, claiming that he cannot enroll unregistered families without proper documentation and approval from the Central MOT.

¶14. WFP explained that families had little recourse for securing missing identity, citizenship, and/or marriage documentation. Until families did secure documents, however, the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) Lower

South office was requesting MOT offices in each governorate to register families and individuals on a provisional basis. WFP also explained the steps being taken in Al Basrah and An Nasiriyah to accomplish this, and promised to bring a letter from CPA Lower South supporting this effort, which will provide the approval that the MOT office in Maysan governorate requested.

¶15. The RRC manager then summoned the RRC staff member responsible for registration in the communities previously visited by DART. Considerable confusion ensued, as the staff member insisted that the list represented entire families, not simply individuals, and further, that the list had not captured all unregistered families, particularly from the tribal villages south of the town of Al Adl. DART and WFP then proposed that the RRC manager and staff accompany them through the Marsh Arab corridor the following day, to try to determine the exact coverage on the list, as well as to clarify the question of individual versus family exclusion from the PDS. The RRC manager held that it was the offender and not his wife or children who were denied a ration card. The RRC manager agreed to travel through the corridor with DART and WFP.

Marsh Arabs Registered as IDPs

¶16. Following the meeting with the RRC manager, DART and WFP met with Ockenden representatives. Ockenden's staff is young and enthusiastic and very knowledgeable about the Marsh Arabs in Maysan governorate, as well as IDPs arriving from Kirkuk and Iraqis returning from border areas inside Iran. Ockenden explained that its objective after it completed the registration of IDPs in Al Amarah town was to register all Marsh Arabs, as they, as a group, "have been determined to be IDPs." (Note: Registration is not linked to need but status. However, specific needs are noted during the PDS registration process. End Note.) DART and WFP questioned Ockenden staff closely about the differences between Marsh Arab communities and the Marsh Arabs who live in Al Amarah town. Ockenden indicated that there is a great variance in the economic standing of Marsh Arab communities and between rural and urban Marsh Arabs, with wealth being attached to land ownership, land sales, and wheat production.

¶17. WFP asked what Ockenden staff did when they came across families that were not registered in the PDS. Staff indicated that this was noted on both the IOM registration papers and on a registration card left with the families. Ockenden does not direct families to the MOT RRC for registration, but informs families that IOM would approach relevant agencies to provide assistance based on their registration cards. (Comment: Even though DART and WFP were concerned by Ockenden's actions regarding registration of Marsh Arabs as IDPs, they did not pursue the issue in Al Amarah with Ockenden, deciding that it would have to be taken up with IOM in Al Basrah. End Comment.)

Al Khaila

¶18. The final visit on 8 June was to Al Khaila, a non-Marsh Arab village east of the Maimona "River of Honor". WFP and DART met with farmers and a food agent serving the village and families living within an 18-kilometer catchment area. Wheat farming is the primary source of income in this region. Some rice is also grown, but rice and sugar cane played a more significant role in the area's economy prior to the draining of the marshes. The sugar cane fields and State-owned sugar refinery reportedly provided employment for both Marsh Arabs and non-Marsh Arabs. The rice crop, while owned by farmers, provided seasonal employment to Marsh Arabs in neighboring communities. Date groves have also been an important source of income in Maysan governorate.

¶19. The food agent interviewed in Al Khaila reported that of the 169 families in his catchment area, 50 families are consistently unable to pay the 250 Iraqi dinars (1,500 ID = USD 1) per person required for the PDS ration. The majority of these families does not own land, are not employed, and must rent their houses. The food agent indicated that these families would sell a portion of their ration in the market and repay him when they can. The food agent expressed his concern that he would not be able to absorb the increasing transport costs (caused by rising fuel prices and security concerns), but he also did not want to ask for more than 250 ID per ration. WFP explained that this issue was affecting food agents throughout southern Iraq. Although the transport issue was unlikely to be resolved in June, efforts were being made by the CPA and MOT to increase the proportion of ration fees allocated to food agents for transport. Before leaving Al Khaila, WFP national staff verified the commodity pick-up date of the food agent and

promised to return to interview some of the families he served.

Al Nasar Alla and Reasons for Non-Registration in the PDS

120. On 9 June, WFP and DART returned to Al Amarah to pick up the RRC manager and staff and proceeded southwest to the Marsh Arab village of Al Nasar Alla. The group was met by the leader of the tribe and invited into a central meeting hall. When the village's male heads of household had assembled, the RRC manager asked whether there were families in the village who had not registered in the PDS. The next hour convinced the RRC manager that, contrary to what he had expressed in Al Amarah, entire households had been excluded from the PDS, not simply one offending member. By far, the most common situation described was when a man, excluded from the PDS because of desertion or avoiding conscription, married outside the civil court system because he had no other choice. (Comment: This situation has been reported as a reason for non-registration throughout the south and is not specific to Marsh Arabs. However, ad hoc assessments indicates that Marsh Arabs were more likely to have avoided involvement in the military and the marshes, while they existed, provided good hiding places, resulting in a higher percentage of unregistered marriages, and therefore under representation in the PDS. End Comment.) Without civil recognition of the marriage, his wife and children cannot therefore be enrolled in the PDS, but the man, still liable to be prosecuted for avoiding/escaping the military, cannot seek civil recognition of the marriage.

Provisional Registration

121. DART and WFP questioned tribal members about the issue of documentation (identity, citizenship, marriage, birth, etc.) and it quickly became apparent that provisional enrollment in the PDS would have to be done absent much of the previously required documentation. The RRC manager proposed that unregistered members of Al Nasar Alla present themselves for registration in one of two larger towns south and north of Al Nasar Alla. The tribal leader replied that this would be impossible, due to tensions between his tribe and the tribes in the area of these towns. The RRC decided to begin the registration process immediately, recording the names of 20 families not already on the previously collected list of 162.

Livelihoods Discussion with Al Nasar Alla Marsh Arabs

122. During this PDS registration process, DART and WFP took the opportunity to question the tribal leader and heads of households about their lives prior to the draining of the marshes, their lives now, and what they hope for with the establishment of a new government. They discussed the role that fishing had played in terms of income generation, as well as (in this particular area) seasonal labor in the cultivation of "amber" rice and sugar cane. Water buffalo continue to provide a source of income from the sale of its milk. They reported about the marshes providing them the materials to construct houses, and how difficult it was now to find reeds long enough. They were excited by the increased water flow in the Maimona "River of Honor" since the Coalition took Al Kut (whose dam controls the water flow on the river), saying the salinity of the water had decreased and that the fish were returning.

123. Those interviewed indicated that since the marshes had been drained, they had been cultivating wheat, which they appreciated as a source of food and income. When questioned further, it appeared that the village had not produced much wheat this year, but wheat cultivation was still considered important. When asked if they will live in the marshes if restored to their natural state, the villagers initially appeared to split their vote. Half said yes, if there were schools for their children, and half said no, because they would lose their wheat fields. In the end, all present agreed that the best alternative would be to have wheat cultivation and the marshlands.

124. From Al Nasar Alla, DART, WFP, and the RRC drove north towards Al Khair and Adl, visiting seven villages of different tribes to determine whether or not targeted PDS registration will be required. Four of the seven villages did require registration. The RRC managers requested assistance from tribal leaders in gathering the names of unregistered families, and informed them of the day the RRC will return to register these families. WFP will follow up to ensure that unregistered families are provisionally

registered and receive rations during June.

Al Majarr al Kabir

125. Before returning to Al Amarah and Al Basrah, the group stopped in Al Majarr al Kabir, the district headquarters for the area visited. WFP and the RRC manager briefed officials about the day's visits, and requested their assistance in ensuring that information about provisional PDS registration was disseminated throughout the district. One of the officials proceeded to produce an IOM registration card (he had been registered as an IDP) stating that he and his people had assumed they were already registered because they had received these "ration cards." WFP explained that in order to receive PDS rations, the RRC would have to register the families whose IOM cards indicate that they were not already registered in the PDS system.

Insecurity Rumors in Al Majarr al Kabir

126. Some of the discussions in Al Majarr al Kabir addressed the issue of insecurity. According to local officials, two theories about the Coalition force's role in security were gaining popularity in Maysan governorate. The first was that Coalition forces permitted crime and insecurity to continue as a way of increasing the population's dependence on the Coalition. The second was that insecurity was permitted to continue as a way of turning people away from their religious leaders because religious leadership was not able to control the insecurity.

Discussions with IOM

127. Returning to Al Basrah, DART and WFP met with IOM's coordinator for IDP assistance. WFP informed IOM of the confusion and expectations arising from Ockenden's effort to register Marsh Arabs as IDPs. The issue of need versus IDP status was also discussed. IOM's coordinator also indicated that he had concerns about the purpose of registration at this point in time. IOM had offered to stop registration in its last meeting with UNOHCI, but the UNOHCI coordinator for southern Iraq encouraged IOM to continue the registration process.

128. DART and WFP stressed the importance of identifying and addressing needs in Maysan governorate from a community-based perspective. The most basic of these needs (water, electricity, and health care) have the potential for creating and/or strengthening links between Marsh Arab tribes, and between Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab communities. DART suggested that IOM include its DART-funded "Iraq Transition Initiative" team in its assessment and registration of Marsh Arabs, including its participation in the UNOHCI inter-agency assessment of Marsh Arabs in Maysan, An Nasiriyah, and Al Basrah governorates. Finally, DART raised the issue of the lack of documentation in Marsh Arab communities. Members suggested that, if IOM continues its registration of Marsh Arabs as IDPs, IOM should do so with the purpose of assisting Marsh Arabs. The IOM registration will regularize their identity, citizenship, and marriage documentation as a crucial element in ensuring Marsh Arab access to public services and representation in civil government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

129. As a result of these visits, DART and WFP are following up on these recommendations:

-- The decentralized, provisional registration of families that are currently not registered in the PDS should be accelerated. Emphasis should be placed on Marsh Arab communities in Al Basrah, Maysan, and Dhi Qar governorates. WFP will follow up with RRCs at the governorate level and DART will follow up with CPA Lower South.

-- Community-based quick impact projects addressing needs in the water, health, and education infrastructure sectors should be accelerated in Marsh Arab and neighboring non-Marsh Arab communities in Maysan governorate, and identified in Al Basrah and An Nasiriyah governorates.

-- IOM and UNOHCI should re-examine their strategy of registering Marsh Arabs as IDPs. They need to focus their efforts on developing a program of assistance to address the documentation needs of Marsh Arabs, as well as other excluded Iraqis. IOM should involve the Iraq Transition Initiative in its Marsh Arab assessment activities.

-- Assessments conducted by USAID and UNOHCI of Marsh Arab communities and the marshes should include an examination of the extent to which the marshes exist as a shared resource that provided economic and social security to and between Marsh Arab and non-Marsh Arab communities.

JONES